

**Humanizing the Other**  
**Mark Twain and the Struggle Against Imperialism Part 1**  
**By Philip Chin**

Many of the views of the Chinese held even by the most liberal 19<sup>th</sup> Century American thinkers and leaders in favor of them would today be considered quite racist. Generally, favorable views were not always motivated by the most altruistic impulses. Charles Crocker, one of the railroad magnates behind the Central Pacific Railroad, defended the railroad's practice of hiring Chinese workers in building the Transcontinental Railroad, and the importation of Chinese workers in general, in Congressional hearings in 1876. Crocker said that importing Chinese gave whites more opportunities to go into management, own their own businesses, and be paid more when they would otherwise be stuck in lowly jobs. In his view, the work would still have to be done by somebody so it might as well be done by the Chinamen. "I think that they afford white men labor. I think that their presence here affords to white men a more elevated class of labor. As I said before, if you should drive these 75,000 Chinamen off you would take 75,000 white men from an elevated class of work and put them down to doing this low class of labor that the Chinamen are now doing, and instead of elevating you would degrade the white labor to that extent. For any man to ride through California, from one end of this State to the other, and see the miles upon miles of uncultivated land, and in the mountains millions of acres of timber, and the foot-hills waiting for someone to go and cultivate them, and then talk about there being too much labor herein the country is simply nonsense, in my estimation. There is labor for all, and the fact that the Chinamen are here gives an opportunity to white men to go in and cultivate this land where they could not cultivate it otherwise."

Samuel Clemens expressed similar sentiments after visiting Hawaii (then known as the Sandwich Islands) in the Sacramento Daily Union newspaper in 1866. Observing the many Chinese laborers being imported to work on sugar plantations in Hawaii he spoke out in favor of the importation of Chinese labor to California saying, "The sooner California adopts Coolie labor the better it will be for her. It cheapens no labor of men's hands save the hardest and most exhausting drudgery - drudgery which neither intelligence nor education are required to fit a man for - drudgery which all white men abhor and are glad to escape from. You may take note of the fact that to adopt Coolie labor could work small hardship to the men who now do the drudgery, for every ship-load of Coolies received there and put to work would so create labor - would permit men to open so many mines they cannot afford to work now, and begin so many improvements they dare not think of at present - that all the best class of the working population who might be emancipated from the pick and shovel by that ship-load would find easier and more profitable employment in superintending and overseeing the Coolies."

It was in Hawaii that Clemens met Anson Burlingame, the American Minister to China. In 1867 he would switch diplomatic services with the agreement of the Chinese and American governments and work on behalf of China as a Chinese diplomat. The Burlingame Treaty in 1869 briefly formalized trade, diplomatic, and travel relations between China and the United States before Congress started passing anti-Chinese immigration laws in the 1870s leading up to the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.

After an exhausting tour of the various Hawaiian Islands, Clemens had been confined to bed to rest with a bad case of saddle boils. But he rose from his sick bed and described the visit he made to meet the diplomats in a letter to his mother and sister, "Hon. Anson Burlingame, U. S. Minister to China, and Gen. Van Valkenburgh, Minister to Japan, with their families and suites, have just arrived here en route. They were going to do me the honor to call on me this morning, and that accounts for my being out of bed now. You know what condition my room is always in when you are not around--so I climbed out of bed and dressed and shaved pretty quick and went up to the residence of the American Minister and called on them... Mr. B. sent for his son, to introduce him--said he could tell that frog story of mine as well as anybody. I told him I was glad to hear it for I never tried to tell it myself without making a botch of it. At his request I have loaned Mr. Burlingame pretty much everything I ever wrote. I guess he will be an almighty wise man by the time he wades through that lot."<sup>1</sup>

Samuel Clemens would always feel great gratitude towards Burlingame, saying about him that, "Burlingame is a man who could be esteemed, respected, and popular anywhere, no matter whether he was among Christians or cannibals."

The reason for this gratitude was that while Clemens was still laid up in bed, the survivors of the *Hornet*, a ship that had sunk after catching fire at sea, landed in Hawaii. Burlingame helpfully had Clemens carried on a stretcher over to the hospital where the survivors were being treated. He then assisted Clemens during his interviews, doing most of the questioning and getting the sailors to open up about their harrowing experience while Clemens wrote down the testimony. It was serious newspaper work that got Clemens wide recognition as a newspaper reporter when it was published in the *Sacramento Union* in California. The details of the shipwreck would excite attention even in today's jaded media. The crew had drifted at sea for a total of 43 days with very little water. Their rations had been limited from the start and had been cut again and again until they'd run completely out of food, "The men seem to have thought in their own minds of the shipwrecked mariner's last dreadful resort - cannibalism; but they do not appear to have conversed about it. They only thought of the casting lots and killing one of their number as a possibility; but even when they were eating rags, and bone, and boots, and shell, and hard oak wood, they seem to have still had a notion that it was remote. They felt that some one of the company must die soon - which one they well knew; and during the last three or four days of their terrible voyage they were patiently but hungrily

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<sup>1</sup> The "frog story" was the short story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," that Mark Twain had published in 1865 that first brought him widespread public fame.

waiting for him.” After several days of total starvation, when it appeared they really would have to resort to cannibalism, the men had miraculously landed in Hawaii.

Mr. Burlingame went with me all the time, and helped me question the men--throwing away invitations to dinner with the princes and foreign dignitaries, and neglecting all sorts of things to accommodate me. You know how I appreciate that kind of thing--especially from such a man, who is acknowledged to have no superior in the diplomatic circles of the world, and obtained from China concessions in favor of America which were refused to Sir Frederick Bruce and Envoys of France and Russia until procured for them by Burlingame himself--which service was duly acknowledged by those dignitaries. He hunted me up as soon as he came here, and has done me a hundred favors since, and says if I will come to China in the first trip of the great mail steamer next January and make his house in Pekin my home, he will afford me facilities that few men can have there for seeing and learning. He will give me letters to the chiefs of the great Mail Steamship Company which will be of service to me in this matter. I expect to do all this, but I expect to go to the States first--and from China to the Paris World's Fair.

In the end, although the reasons he did so will remain forever a mystery since his letters and writings never explained his decision, Clemens decided to return to the United States instead of going to visit Burlingame in China, “The China Mail Steamer is getting ready and everybody says I am throwing away a fortune in not going in her. I firmly believe it myself.”

The Hawaiian adventure provided him with material that he used in a popular series of lectures that he delivered in his travels across the United States titled, “Our Fellow Savages of the Sandwich Islands.” There was just a hint of what would evolve into Clemens public stance against imperialism. The mildly criticism implied within the following paragraph nearly glosses over the dying Native Hawaiian culture. The seeming indifference to this horror reflects the fact that his views were still evolving. At this stage of his life, Samuel Clemens, like many other white Americans, still believed in the civilizing mission of the United States in the world, even at such a horrible cost for non-white people. He believed in colonialism, as he would later admit.

When these islands were discovered the population was about 400,000, but the white man came and brought various complicated diseases, and education, and civilization, and all sorts of calamities, and consequently the population began to drop off with commendable activity. Forty years ago they were reduced to 200,000, and the educational and civilizing facilities being increased they dwindled down to 55,000, and it is proposed to send a few more missionaries and finish them. It isn't the education or civilization that has settled them; it is the imported diseases, and they have all got the consumption and other reliable distempers, and to speak figuratively, they are retiring from business pretty fast. When they pick up and leave we will take possession as lawful heirs.

Samuel Clemens attitude towards domestic American colonialism, the decimation of the Native Americans going on in the United States throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, is ambivalent at best. In his 1870 article published in the *Galaxy Magazine*, “The Noble Red Man,” Mark Twain satirized the romantic version of the Native Americans presented by popular 19<sup>th</sup> Century authors such as James Fennimore Cooper in novels such as “The Last of the Mohicans.” This “noble savage” is something that has been stereotyped in

Hollywood movies for generations, often portrayed by whites in “red face” rather than actual Native Americans.

His language is intensely figurative. He never speaks of the moon, but always of "the eye of the night;" nor of the wind as the wind, but as "the whisper of the Great Spirit;" and so forth and so on. His power of condensation is marvelous. In some publications he seldom says anything but "Waugh!" and this, with a page of explanation by the author, reveals a whole world of thought and wisdom that before lay concealed in that one little word.

He is noble. He is true and loyal; not even imminent death can shake his peerless faithfulness. His heart is a well-spring of truth, and of generous impulses, and of knightly magnanimity. With him, gratitude is religion; do him a kindness, and at the end of a lifetime he has not forgotten it. Eat of his bread, or offer him yours, and the bond of hospitality is sealed--a bond which is forever inviolable with him.

Twain then presents a picture of what he says is the ugly reality of the Native American. However, he pushes this extreme so far in the opposite direction that it is difficult to tell whether he is being serious or just being sarcastic for greater contrast to the breathless idealization of romantic writers. As has been pointed out by critics decrying Samuel Clemens as a racist, many white readers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, with their lack of education about real Native Americans, would have taken these statements entirely seriously.

There is nothing figurative, or moonshiny, or sentimental about his language. It is very simple and unostentatious, and consists of plain, straightforward lies. His "wisdom" conferred upon an idiot would leave that idiot helpless indeed.

He is ignoble--base and treacherous, and hateful in every way. Not even imminent death can startle him into a spasm of virtue. The ruling trait of all savages is a greedy and consuming selfishness, and in our Noble Red Man it is found in its amplest development. His heart is a cesspool of falsehood, of treachery, and of low and devilish instincts. With him, gratitude is an unknown emotion; and when one does him a kindness, it is safest to keep the face toward him, lest the reward be an arrow in the back. To accept of a favor from him is to assume a debt which you can never repay to his satisfaction, though you bankrupt yourself trying. To give him a dinner when he is starving, is to precipitate the whole hungry tribe upon your hospitality, for he will go straight and fetch them, men, women, children, and dogs, and these they will huddle patiently around your door, or flatten their noses against your window, day after day, gazing beseechingly upon every mouthful you take, and unconsciously swallowing when you swallow! The scum of the earth!

Was he being serious? The article ends this way, “Such is the genuine Noble Aborigine. I did not get him from books, but from personal observation.”

1870 was also the year that the same Galaxy Magazine published Mark Twain’s article, “Disgraceful Prosecution of a Boy” satirizing the arrest of a boy for assaulting Chinese in San Francisco while dressed in his Sunday best clothes. Twain said that the boy couldn’t have known any better since he’d been educated in both Christianity and violently hating the Chinese by his elders in society and his parents. “Everything conspired to teach him that it was a high and holy thing to stone a Chinaman, and yet he no sooner attempts to do his duty than he is punished for it--he, poor chap, who has been aware all his life that

one of the principal recreations of the police, out toward the Gold Refinery, was to look on with tranquil enjoyment while the butchers of Brannan street set their dogs on unoffending Chinamen, and make them flee for their lives.”

In 1871, Mark Twain presented an article about meeting the “Red Man” around Niagara Falls in his short story, “Niagara.” Again, the writer is a wide-eyed romanticist waxing rhapsodic about the “noble savages.”

The noble Red Man has always been a friend and darling of mine. I love to read about him in tales and legends and romances. I love to read of his inspired sagacity, and his love of the wild free life of mountain and forest, and his general nobility of character, and his stately metaphorical manner of speech, and his chivalrous love for the dusky maiden, and the picturesque pomp of his dress and accoutrements. Especially the picturesque pomp of his dress and accoutrements. When I found the shops at Niagara Falls full of dainty Indian bead-work, and stunning moccasins, and equally stunning toy figures representing human beings who carried their weapons in holes bored through their arms and bodies, and had feet shaped like a pie, I was filled with emotion. I knew that now, at last, I was going to come face to face with the noble Red Man.

A lady clerk in a shop told me, indeed, that all her grand array of curiosities were made by the Indians, and that they were plenty about the Falls, and that they were friendly, and it would not be dangerous to speak to them. And sure enough, as I approached the bridge leading over to Luna Island, I came upon a noble Son of the Forest sitting under a tree, diligently at work on a bead reticule. He wore a slouch hat and brogans, and had a short black pipe in his mouth. Thus does the baneful contact with our effeminate civilization dilute the picturesque pomp which is so natural to the Indian when far removed from us in his native haunts. I addressed the relic as follows:

"Is the Wawhoo-Wang-Wang of the Whack-a- Whack happy? Does the great Speckled Thunder sigh for the warpath, or is his heart contented with dreaming of the dusky maiden, the Pride of the Forest? Does the mighty Sachem yearn to drink the blood of his enemies, or is he satisfied to make bead reticules for the papposes of the paleface? Speak, sublime relic of bygone grandeur-- venerable ruin, speak!"

The relic said:

"An' is it mesilf, Dennis Hooligan, that ye'd be takin' for a dirty Injin, ye drawlin', lanternjawed, spider-legged divil! By the piper that played before Moses, I'll ate ye!"

Each “Red Man” he subsequently encounters is engaged in making moccasins and other typically expected Native American objects for sale to the tourists. They respond to the narrator’s attempts to speak to them in their supposed Native American language (as exemplified in James Fennimore Cooper novels) with increasing hostility, eventually resulting in a large group of them assaulting the narrator and tossing him over Niagara Falls.

While recovering from this harrowing near-death experience the narrator says:

"It is an awful savage tribe of Indians that do the bead work and moccasins for Niagara Falls, doctor. Where are they from?"

"Limerick, my son."

Mark Twain used a similar plot device to satirize the noble savage stereotype as well as credulous whites in another *Galaxy Magazine* article the previous year, in 1870. In "John Chinaman in New York," a jeering crowd of whites surround a man dressed in Chinese clothes and queue on the street advertising Chinese goods being sold in a New York City store. The narrator says, "I wondered what was passing behind his sad face, and what distant scene his vacant eye was dreaming of. Were his thoughts with his heart, ten thousand miles away, beyond the billowy wastes of the Pacific? among the ricefields and the plummy palms of China? under the shadows of remembered mountain peaks, or in groves of bloomy shrubs and strange forest trees unknown to climes like ours? And now and then, rippling among his visions and his dreams, did he hear familiar laughter and half-forgotten voices, and did he catch fitful glimpses of the friendly faces of a bygone time? A cruel fate it is, I said, that is befallen this bronzed wanderer." Upon speaking to the fellow though the supposed Chinese man responds to the narrator in a stereotypical Irish accent, just like the "Red Men" that Twain wrote about in *Niagara Falls*. All turn out to be Irish dressed up in clothes to transform themselves into Chinese or Native Americans, solely for the benefit of the oblivious tourists and shoppers. Other than showing lingering anti-Irish prejudices carried over from his days as a Know-Nothing supporter in the 1850s, it remains unclear what the real attitudes of Samuel Clemens were towards Native Americans.

Mark Twain is probably the most popular and well known American writer in China today. But he is remembered there more for being an anti-colonialist rather than for his humor and satire.

As Selina Lai-Henderson writes in her book, "Mark Twain in China, "Lao She (老舍), the first Chinese writer to be selected for the Nobel Prize in literature (in 1968), commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of Twain's death by highlighting Twain's bravery in speaking up against American imperialism: "Twain always stood on the side of the American people and the people of the world as well. As we are commemorating him today, we feel as if he were still standing among us, struggling side by side with us against the imperialists headed by the United States."

In the 1870s, Samuel Clemens was still evolving in his attitudes and beliefs about race and colonialism. The image of anti-colonialist hero that China honors him for today still remained to be developed.

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